



**Interview with Jessie Duke  
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KENNEALLY: To be a pioneer takes guts. The work is hard and long and often lonely. Pioneers are fast learners and experts in endurance. It's a life of trial and error.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. The Hard Fifty Farm lies in rural Lansing, Kansas, on the Missouri River northwest of Kansas City. The homesteaders and self-identified farm punks who call the farm home went back to the land to raise a variety of crops as well as care for an ever-growing group of rescue animals.

Remarkably, though, the stock that flourishes best on the Hard Fifty are books and zines. Pioneers Press, headquartered there, is a combined publishing house and small press distributor. Since its launch in 2012, Pioneers Press has consistently produced titles that have made the bestseller lists of independent bookstores around the world, including Powell's Books' number one bestselling small press title for the last three consecutive years. The publisher's catalog focuses on issues in survival and sustainability on the farm and in the city, as well as health, gender, sexuality, social justice, and food movements. Jessie Duke owns Pioneers Press, and she joins me now. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Jessie.

DUKE: Hi, Chris. Thanks for inviting me on.

KENNEALLY: We're looking forward to chatting with you, Jessie, because we met at this summer's Yale Publishing Course, where you received the 2016 Innovative Leader Scholarship. It's an honor you earned, certainly deservedly so, over 15 years working in independent publishing. You were the founder and managing editor for *Fahrenheit San Diego*, a weekly arts and entertainment newspaper with a very significant copy circulation – 40,000 copy circulation. And in 2013, Jessie was awarded the Rocket Grant by the Charlotte Street Foundation and the University of Kansas Spencer Museum of Art, with funding provided by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. That project, which I hope you'll tell us about, the Hard Fifty Farm Zine Mobile, is a touring small press library and portable education facility based out of a converted horse trailer, and it focuses on the empowerment of independent publishing.

So there's a lot there, but imagine that we met at the Yale Publishing Course. So Hard Fifty Farm meets Yale Publishing. It's a little bit of Green Acres in reverse, if you want. (laughter) What was the experience like?

DUKE: I was really excited to be there. When I applied, I wasn't sure that I would even be accepted. And then when I was accepted to the program, I started to panic,



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because it was a lot of money for us, and I was trying to figure out how to make it work. I applied for the scholarship, just like fingers crossed and just so excited to get the scholarship and to be able to go.

Going to Yale from being in very small-town Kansas, there's a little bit of culture shock. But also coming from small press and independent publishing, there's the culture shock of being in a room full of people from Penguin Random House and Hachette. It's exciting, but also it's a little overwhelming, for sure. But it was really nice to be – I felt like I was invited to be part of a conversation that I wouldn't normally be participating in, so that really meant a lot to me.

**KENNEALLY:** Certainly the Yale Publishing Course is kind of publishing in microcosm, because publishing today in 2016 is a global conversation. So not only were, as you say, representatives there from some of the big five houses based in Manhattan, but from publishers around the world, in Europe, Australia, the Middle East, and so forth. What were the kinds of conversations you had? Did you find that there was common ground despite all the differences?

**DUKE:** Oh, certainly. I found talking to the other small publishers about the similarities between the difficulties that we have, seeing that we're all struggling with the same things, kind of made me feel like this wasn't unique to Pioneers Press. It kind of takes the weight off a little bit to realize that this isn't just something that we haven't figured out yet. It's just that this is a really difficult business to be a part of.

But yeah, talking to the people that came from the bigger houses, I was a little bit surprised that I knew as much as I did and that I could participate in the conversations. I thought that maybe I was going to be a fly on the wall or the girl at the dance that sadly – the wallflower waiting for a dance partner, you know? But I feel like it was very open, and people were respectful and engaged me. I don't know why I was surprised by that, but it just felt very welcoming.

**KENNEALLY:** And for you, the press – as important as it is and as much as your background is in publishing – it sounds to me like it's more, if I could put it this way, a personal cause for you. You're at the intersection of where your professional life and your personal life meet.

**DUKE:** Oh yeah, definitely. I've always known that I wanted to be involved in publishing. Initially I thought that I was going to be a journalist, and I was much better as an editor. The work is something that I'm passionate about. But also seeing the independent artists – being friends with these people and seeing how difficult it was to break into more mainstream either distribution channels or getting picked up by bigger houses – that made me want to help my friends. That's kind of where the press started. Instead of me just wanting to do a more normal career path and trying to work for the bigger houses, it made more sense for me to



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kind of stay within my community and see what we could do outside of those channels.

**KENNEALLY:** That's interesting, because this rural community in Kansas specifically for your office there, but it's a community, as you say, of artists and people with some very special concerns about society. And the reception that Pioneers Press has had, nonetheless, goes far beyond that community. So you really have succeeded within, if you will, that farm punk world, but you've also done pretty well in a more traditional world. How did you manage to bridge that gap?

**DUKE:** I think we've put out some good titles. That's the main thing. We sort of intentionally avoided more traditional distribution, so most of the sales – getting picked up by indie bookstores and things – has been doing this direct-to-consumer sales or just reaching out to the press or bookstores. Instead of sending out a press release, we're going into these bookstores and meeting owners. I think having this personal connection has really helped us grow, because I think people can see that we're passionate about what we're doing, and it kind of makes people want to either get involved or help us out. So I think because we put the time into making these relationships, I think that's why we've been able to do as well as we have.

**KENNEALLY:** One of the ways you established those relationships was taking the press out on tour, so to speak. So you've got this Hard Fifty Farm Zine Mobile, which we said was an educational facility based out of a converted horse trailer. I'm trying to picture that in my mind. What was that like? Where did you go with that, and what was the reception you had?

**DUKE:** We haven't been able to take it out as much as we wanted yet. It's still kind of a work in progress. Being out in rural Leavenworth County, Kansas, there's a lot of stuff that we knew that we were missing out on culturally. It was important to us to be able to take our work into other communities like ours that are usually passed over. So we did take this horse trailer and paint it up, and my dad made custom shelves for it. You can load it up and then take it to a location and bring all the bookshelves out. You can scale with a tent and things how big you want this display or workshop space to be.

We've taken it to libraries in more rural areas. We've also taken it to art walk events. And the reception for it has been great. I love the idea of being able to take books, zines, art, whatever into spaces that you don't usually expect it to be in.

**KENNEALLY:** You mentioned at Yale some common ground you had with the big five houses. The challenge they are facing is getting books directly into the hands of consumers. The bookstore landscape has changed so very much. So there, you've got a real sort of one-to-one exchange. You're putting the book itself right into the hand of the reader. Were you able to tell people about that experience – tell people



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from the big five – and were they able to see the possibility? It may be much larger, but really it's something familiar, I'm sure, to them.

DUKE: Yeah, I think it was kind of funny listening to some of these ideas that the big houses are having, like doing pop-up shops. They're looking at trying to find new ways of reaching readers. And a lot of those things are things that have been happening in the small press community sort of out of desperation at times or kind of being innovative just because there's no other way. You don't have the resources, so you have to get creative. So things like pop-up shops are like, well, we can't afford to have a bookstore all the time. So doing a pop-up shop is the only option.

It was interesting seeing that, that a lot of the ideas that they have are things that we've been doing – not just Pioneers, but other small press publishers, as well, and that “direct-to-consumer” is just really natural for small press. That's one of the really nice things about being a small press is being able to have that relationship with your readers.

KENNEALLY: Right. I was going to ask you, Jessie, about this notion of empowering the independent publishers. But it sounds to me like if you were in that room at Yale, you might have been giving some ideas to big five people, that it was empowering them, in a way.

DUKE: Yeah, there's definitely – I had this sense where I can share some of the ideas, but there's also kind of holding your cards close to your chest, because I can't get the resources that they have. So the things that the small press community is coming up with, you almost don't want to give away too much, you know? We are at such a disadvantage that saying, yes, pop-up shops are great, that you should definitely do that – it's hard to encourage that, even though being passionate about books and keeping people reading, you want to be supportive of the bigger houses also, because they've got the same mission as us.

KENNEALLY: Absolutely, and that mission is to reach readers. So as a way to close out this really interesting discussion, Jessie, regarding independent publishing, what can you share with your colleagues in independent publishing, do you think is worth their hearing about succeeding and about persevering – that kind of pioneer spirit?

DUKE: I think we need to keep doing what we're doing. And whether or not we felt like that was working well enough, I think attending the Yale course really reinforced a lot of the ideas I had or kind of gave me more confidence in how we've been running Pioneers. So I think the small press community is that. We are a community. We're helping each other out a lot. We're telling each other what works. And I think if we just keep doing that, then we'll be able to keep small press publishing alive. We'll be able to put out great books, take care of our authors. So



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it's really just – keep doing what you're doing. It may seem really hard, but I think we're on the right path here.

KENNEALLY: I think you have to keep doing what you're doing, Jessie Duke, and the listeners and the readers have to remember their part, too. They've got to buy some of those books.

DUKE: That's right.

KENNEALLY: All right. Jessie Duke is the owner of Pioneers Press. Really enjoyed chatting with you today on Beyond the Book.

DUKE: Thank you so much, Chris.

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Our engineer and co-producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on Beyond the Book.

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